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NEWS
FROM YOUR MUSEUM
THE ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Know your Museum better

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PIONEER HOUSEBUILDING PROBLEMS

The summer months see much activity in the building trade, though not nearly enough to supply the needs of our communities today. The feats of our pioneer ancestors in Ontario, who hewed their homes out of the forest with the simplest of tools are all the more remarkable in view of present difficulties.

It is a far cry to the log shanty which constituted the first home in the early days. The pioneer models of Mr. J. McN. McCrea in the Royal Ontario Museum ably demonstrate the progression from the rounded log to the forerunner of the modern plank. In the first shanty, notched pine logs were used, the spaces between being filled with moss, bark or clay. No nails or screws were available and the roofs were of shooks, bark, or were 'scoop' roofs, formed of basswood logs split in two, hollowed out and laid concave and convex. Neither were iron hinges to be had. Hinges in those days were square pieces of wood, through a centre hole of which went a long pin. Models demonstrating squaring or "making" timber and shingle making show the progress to the time when a settlement has grown up and a schoolhouse is being built. Improved technique is evident; for the logs are flattened on the inside and outside and the space filled with wood and lime mortar. The roof has been shingled and an unfinished portion shows a board lath and plaster ceiling.

From these beginnings have sprung the neat cottages and pleasantly hospitable larger frame houses of today.

ONTARIO STONE

During the heat of mid-summer, the Royal Ontario Museum remains cool, and inviting to the visitor, probably due to its stone construction. When one seeks to find the source of the stone, the amazing fact emerges that it was all, with the exception of a small amount of Italian marble, from Ontario quarries. Certainly this building is strong proof that fine architectural effects may be achieved by the use of domestic stone. The sandstones used in the exterior walls are from Credit Valley, the Queenston dolomite, used externally and internally, from the Niagara district; the beautiful breccia marble, green serpentine marble, and sodalite are all from the Bancroft area in Hastings County.

EARLY USE OF BIRCH BARK

Every holidayer carries a mental picture of the Indians in their birch bark canoes, skimming the waters of our northern rivers and lakes. In wandering through the Indian galleries at the Royal Ontario Museum, one can observe many other beautiful utilitarian objects also made of birch bark. The first moose-call horns were of that material, and under the influence of the French, the Indians of the St Lawrence valley produced very attractive and ornate luxury articles such as boxes and mats. French settlers early took to the use of birch bark, and often it is difficult to distinguish the work of one from the other. Birch bark later became widely used by the pioneer English speaking settlers because of its waterproof and flyproof qualities.

FEATHERED PROCRASTINATORS

Although August is the month in which most of the bird world lazes in comparative retirement while growing a new winter coat, two species, the goldfinch and the waxwing are at the peak of their activity. Their courtship period is prolonged, and it is not until well into summer that they settle down to the serious business of building a nest, with the result that the young are not hatched until August. Possibly one might deduce a certain amount of shrewedness in this procedure, as these birds are able to take advantage of the blooming thistle for their nest-building, and also their nests are free of the eggs of the parasitic cowbird.

Disadvantages are also evident, however. Almost every year the bird experts at the Royal Ontario Museum receive evidence that goldfinches have been too dilatory about raising their families, and the parent birds have gone south leaving their young to fend for themselves.

FROM FOREST TO COAL BIN

Where the next ton of coal is coming from is a problem about which hundreds of people are forced to worry even during the heat of August. The Royal Ontario Museum cannot help to obtain that much needed fuel product, but it can demonstrate, by means of its varied collections, many interesting facts relating to the age in which most of the world's coal supply was formed.

Three hundred million years ago vast swamps covered much of the land. In the swamps dense forests flourished, although the trees were different from those of the present day. There were giant club-mosses, huge horsetails, and towering seed-ferns. Great dragon-flies with a wingspread of nearly three feet flew in and out among the trees. Cockroaches six inches long scampered over the ground. Millepedes crawled sluggishly over the sodden logs.

When the trees died, they fell into the swamps and some were quickly covered over by muddy waters, thus preventing their decay. As millions of years went by, layers and layers of buried forest were changed into coal through heat and pressure, and other agencies.

SARDONYX FOR AUGUST

A poetic legend tells us that the August-born must wear a sardonyx to achieve conjugal felicity. This stone is a member of a very large family in the mineral kingdom—the quartz family. The mineral, which is composed of silicon dioxide, grows in layers of uniform thickness. An attractive looking formation is produced through one layer having the brown colour of Sard interspersed with white layers of Chalcedony. In small caves in volcanic or sedimentary rocks one could expect to find this mineral.

By occurring in uniform layers, Sardonyx is easily adapted to cameo engraving, where the cameo has the base of one colour and the figure of another. Added to this feature, Sardonyx, because of its porous nature, can be artificially coloured in order to deepen the paler shades. A cameo is displayed in the Royal Ontario Mueum, as well as specimens of quartz with its many varieties, including Sardonyx.